Board policies at altitude. Empowering systems to act as scaling agents of change

The governance model engages the Board at a high altitude – establishing and holding university and system leaders accountable for advancing measurable priorities without prescribing how. It empowers university leadership to pursue strategies that advance the Board's priorities in ways that reflect local circumstances and to engage with the chancellor in the design and execution of systemwide initiatives that ensure all universities and the system succeed.

The approach was written into new policies (enacted after the redesign was initiated) and in amendments to existing ones. A sample follows.

Revised policies

1. The policy about appointing presidents was substantially revised in 2021. Previously, it had dictated in some detail precisely how the University Councils of Trustees selected two candidates for consideration and appointment by the Board. For example, it dictated the utilization of an executive search firm, whether interim presidents could be considered, and other execution-level details. The revised policy states the Board's objectives at a high level, confirms that all searches must conform to statute (Act 188) and consult with specific stakeholder groups, and then more or less leaves it to the Chancellor and chair of the Council of Trustees (with agreement from the Board Chair) to work out a process that fits a university's specific circumstances. Since adopted, no two searches have been identical, each has been modified to suit the specific needs of the university making the appointment, and all have been welcomed by university stakeholders and Board members alike.
2. The policy on the Board's distribution of state-allocated dollars (2022) is based on a formula developed by a working group of university leaders, with input from various stakeholders. The policy outlines the formula but leaves the Chancellor (in consultation) to make implementation decisions which can have a material impact on how funds are allocated.

New policies

3. The Board's resolution about its fiduciary responsibility (2023) introduces a new governance approach. It bundles several policies together (some new since the redesign – financial stability – some pre-dating it – tuition setting). All written (or revised) to specify policy direction without getting into implementation details. The innovation in the approach derives from its ability to tie stove-piped policies together to get at their deeply underlying intent, which in this case is to ensure sound financial management at all universities, including through the implementation of "playbooks" developed by universities and defining practices that universities are required to implement in key areas including budgeting, academic program array management, course scheduling, enrollment management, and financial aid optimization.